New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

Volume X, Number 2 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of January 24, 1949

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"The Shop at Sly Corner"

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"The Shop at Sly Corner"

The New York Times

JANUARY 19, 1949

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Boris Karloff, the illustrious shudder man, is stalking ominously through "The Shop at Sly Corner," produced at the Booth last evening. This just about concludes the bill of virtues for the occasion. Having had a respectable career in London, Edward Percy's ode to crime has crossed the ocean to a place where crime is taken seriously as an art, science and vocation.

Mr. Percy does get around to a satisfactory throttling in the second act; for good measure, he gives us a suicide by poisoning at the end. But the home-life of his gallows-bird is infernally sedate when he is not breaking the law, and Mr. Percy has written about it with dreadful composure.

Mr. Karloff is too good a man to waste on so much domestic banality. Notice the straight line from his neck through the back of his head—the perfect bone structure for a killer. He has the shoulders, arms and hands of an expert at natural homicide. His eyes are baleful. He walks like a panther. An extraordinarily gifted assassin, he deserves steady employment with plenty of work.

But "The Shop at Sly Corner" wastes most of the evening depicting his bourgeois devotion to family and generosity as a parent. Mr. Karloff is good at this, too. His voice booms with loving tenderness. His manners are considerate. He is a connoisseur of good music and the drama. And he wears his tweeds like a self-respecting burgher. Probably he could push a baby carriage gently. These are modest virtues, common to a great many citizens. But no one else can do such a pretty job of garroting.

In "The Shop at Sly Corner," Mr. Karloff breaks the law reluctantly, which shows a rather poor attitude towards the interesting aspects of life. When he is not pampering his family, he is a cautious fence. A treacherous office assistant catches him at it, blackmails him and has to be removed from society. The job of social removal draws on Mr. Karloff's great gifts for a few violently silent moments. But the rest of the play seems to have been written in a dinner-suit at a library. Mr. Percy's attitude toward crime is intellectual.

* * *

Under Margaret Perry's workmanlike and appreciative direction, the performance is enjoyably animated. As the cocksure blackmailer, Jay Robinson is horribly plausible—sleek and stealthy and contemptible. As a sister in criminology, Ethel Griffies gives a sharp, shrill performance worthy of finer stage literature. Una O'Connor is gaudily amusing as the household drudge. Reginald Mason portrays the impeccable deportment of the police.

There is an affably shifty sketch of an experienced thief by Emmett Rogers. There are good performances in other parts by Philip Saville, Jane Lloyd-Jones, Mary MacLeod and Alfred Hyslop. But Mr. Karloff is capable of much finer slaughter than anything "The Shop at Sly Corner" has dreamed of.

'THE SHOP AT SLY CORNER'

Play by Edward Percy; staged by Margaret Perry; setting and costumes by Willis Knighton; presented by Gant Gaither at the Booth Theatre, January 18, 1949. The cast:

Archie Fellowes...Jay Robinson
Descius Heiss....Boris Karloff
Margaret Heiss..Mary MacLeod
Joan Deal.....Jane Lloyd-Jones
Mathilde Heiss...Ethel Griffies
Mrs. Catt.....Una O'Connor
Robert Graham...Philip Saville
Corder Morris..Emmett Rogers
Steve Hubbard....Alfred Hyslop
John Elliot.....Reginald Mason

Synopsis: The action of the play takes place in a room at the back of a London shop. Act I—A Friday evening in August. Act II—A Sunday evening—the following winter. Act III—The following Tuesday morning.

Journal American

JANUARY 19, 1949

A Would-be Thriller That Doesn't Thrill

By ROBERT GARLAND

In the theatre there's nothing less thrilling than a thriller that doesn't thrill. Edward Percy's "The Shop at Sly Corner" is the thrill-less thriller I've got in mind.

First shown in London four years ago, it ran and ran. It may still be running in the English lowlands for all that I can tell you.

Outside the showshop, the English author of last night's importation into the Booth is Edward Percy Smith, Conservative Member of Parliament. As such, he may know his constituency's desires. Apparently he does! But he's mistaken. I'm very much afraid, where his American audiences are concerned.

At the north end of the Shubert Alley, "The Shop at Sly Corner" never once gets going. From the beginning, it defeats itself by its false pretensions. Act by act, it starts things it doesn't finish. Scene by scene, it walks out on its own suggestions. Only as a thrill-less thriller does it qualify.

For instance! There's a fiery furnace Willis Knighton must have had fun designing. But not a single human cinder comes out of it. And there're a couple of suits of armor, one with a horrific hammer in its metal mitten. But no one, not even Boris Karloff "with murder in his heart," is knocked off by it . . .

And that's the evening's greatest disappointment!

* * *

Hero's a Fence

Descius Heiss is the shopkeeper at Sly Corner. He's a fence, if you know what that means. If you don't, he's a receiver of stolen goods who deals in gold and jewels. The gold he melts in the aforesaid fiery furnace. The jewels he misplaces on the floor. Frequently he finds them in the dustpan.

Descius has a bad boy working for him. He's Archie Fellowes, and a bad boy because he spies on his employer's fencing. Not only does he double-cross the dirty work of his superior, but he threatens to tell everything he knows unless Mr. Heiss comes across with quite a bit of English folding money. Blackmail, it's known as.

Now blackmailing a crook isn't exactly blackmail. Or is it? At any rate, it's not very blackmailish at the Booth. And the blackmailer's yen for the crook's daughter isn't very yennish. And the love affair between the crook's daughter and a young man in uniform isn't anything for a first-nighter to remember.

And that's just about the story. Save for Mathilde Heiss, the crook's could-be pathetic sister. And Mrs. Catt, the crook's would-be comic maid-of-all-work. And John Elliot, the crook's should-be breath-taking human bloodhound. But, along with the thrill-less thriller of which they're part, they fail to register . . .

Surely, it's not for any lack of trying!

* * *

Not My Ideal

Never having seen Boris Karloff in the pictures that pretend to be plays, I wouldn't know how his on-stage acting compares with his acting on the screen. But I've seen him in the flesh in "Arsenic and Old Lace," "The Linden Tree" and, now, "The Shop at Sly Corner." He's not my ideal of an actor in the round.

Ethel Griffies, a three-dimensional delight when given any chance to be so, is visibly discouraged as Mr. Karloff's on-stage sister, Una O'Connor is more Natwickian than Mildred as Mr. Karloff's on-stage maid-of-all-work. Reginald Mason as Mr. Karloff's on-stage tracker-downer.

The others, all six of them, do as they're told by Margaret Perry, presently trying her unpracticed hand at theatrical direction. Neither she nor they are any too triumphant. But I doubt if Joshua Logan, were he in Miss Perry's directorial boots, could succeed in making the would-be thriller thrilling.

Willis Knighton's atmospheric setting of a sky-lighted back room in London is the worthiest thing about "The Shop at Sly Corner" as exposed last night beside the Shubert Alley. Although it's necessarily tricked up like Joe Cook's old house in New Jersey, it amounts to delectable designing . . .

If you want to buy a thrill, don't try "The Shop at Sly Corner." It's all out of them!

New York World-Telegram

JANUARY 19, 1949

'The Shop at Sly Corner' Opens; Its Plot Thickens Very Little

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

In our idea of a good theater season there should always be a good thriller of the mystery or suspense school, but not, unfortunately, one like "The Shop at Sly Corner." This newly imported English play never really puzzles you, and only brings you mildly toward the edge of your seat in the last act.

For the rest, it is a straightforward tale told with no guile. It would seem to have been composed for the purpose of unveiling a not entirely original but effective twist at the very end. Before that it is built with no more complication than a C major scale, and it is expressed in the mundane language of a radio program for the very young.

An antique dealer named Heiss has an attractive violinist for a daughter and an emotional housekeeper for a sister. He is a refugee from Devil's Island, and makes most of his income from receiving stolen jewelry and metal which he melts down in an electric furnace behind a revolving fireplace.

Heiss also has a sinister assistant, a snarling dandy who inevitably finds out what his employer is up to and begins blackmailing him. Just as inevitably Heiss puts him out of the way by pressure of the hands on his throat.

The police make an extremely lackadaisical investigation which nets them nothing, while on pretty much the same evidence, members of Heiss' family figure out what he has done. One of the play's little surprises comes when the daughter's hitherto upright fiance agrees to hide Heiss' guilt if he will give up antique dealing for chicken farming.

Despite this, the killer gets his come-uppance through a reasonable enough accident. So the rest are left with clean consciences, except for the sister, who in a surprise twist half-way through the play is revealed to know all about the stolen goods.

The older characters play in a vague accent when they remember it. Most of the dialogue is characterized by the moment when one character, seeing another enter the room, says, "Oh, it is you!"

There is a good deal of business about a blow pipe complete with darts dipped in curare, which would have provided a much more interesting murderer, but only makes itself useful in the finale.

All this is played with heavy-handed enthusiasm by Boris Karloff, Una O'Connor, Ethel Griffies, Reginald Mason, Emmett Rogers, and others. Miss O'Connor gets her customary quota of laughs as a housemaid. Jay Robinson is entirely despicable as the murderee, and Mary MacLeod is very handsome as the daughter.

There is a gloomily effective set by Willis Knighton that promises more weird excitement than is ever realized in the play, which consistently warns everyone days ahead just what is coming.

DAILY NEWS

JANUARY 19, 1949

'The Shop at Sly Corner' a Mild British Melodrama With Karloff

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In the program of "The Shop at Sly Corner," which Gant Gaither tendered to a Booth Theatre audience last evening, is a half page which reads: "Notice from Producer to Cast. Dear Gang: If this show isn't a bigger hit than 'Life With Father,' it certainly won't be your fault.

"After the opening tonight, I'm having an opening of another kind. I'm opening several bottles of—— whiskey by way of celebration. You've really EARNED a taste of the Perfectly Balanced Blend that's rich yet light, mild yet hearty. . . ."

Well, this was just a paid ad for a brand of hooch and Producer Gaither had nothing to do with it and probably never saw it. But I do hope that somebody opened several bottles of something at midnight for Boris Karloff and his fellow players in "The Shop at Sly Corner," for the play certainly was not their fault and they rated a stimulant after it was over—along with the audience.

Yep, It's Murder.

I'm extremely fond of almost all deliberately paced British melodramas. I relish their Perfectly Balanced Blend that's rich yet light, and last evening I should have enjoyed the way Mr. Karloff strangled a nasty young man named Jay Robinson and then pretended to the Inspector that he knew nothing about it. And if I ever ran into something on a stage or in a glass that was mild yet hearty I suppose I'd like it, too, being ready always to try anything.

But "The Shop at Sly Corner" is not my blend. Too mild. Mr. Karloff is a fence—or receiver, as they say at the Yard—who maintains an antique shop as a respectable front. When a young assistant discovers Mr. Karloff's real business and begins to blackmail him, Boris tries to get him with a poisoned dart but his aim is bad—so, with those long arms and big hands, he gozzles the fellow. After this there is another act with an ironic ending that is non-intoxicant.

A Good Newcomer.

Mr. Robinson, who is 18, does a capital job as the little stinker who so richly and yet heartily deserves to be murdered. He has a great deal of the quality that a young Emlyn Williams showed in "Night Must Fall"—smug and insinuating and oily. Mr. Robinson has just come over here from England, and his next stop is Hollywood if he can get a reservation on one of those cars that go right through Chicago. Ethel Griffies, Una O'Connor, Reginald Mason and other players contribute to a play which is not nearly as big a hit as "Life With Father."

Edward Percy, the author, was co-author of the excellent "Ladies in Retirement." Under the title of "Play With Fire," last evening's piece was tried in 1941 with Henry Hull in the leading role, but it never got to Broadway. In 1945 it began a two-year run in London. Part of the austerity program, I guess.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
JANUARY 19, 1949

'Shop at Sly Corner' A Murder Melodrama

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

If you feel, as I do, that even a poor murder melodrama is better than no murder melodrama at all, you may have some fairly entertaining moments during the course of "The Shop at Sly Corner," which opened at the Booth last night. This latest exercise in polite crime by Edward Percy, co-author of the excellent "Ladies in Retirement," is not a very good example of its respectable British school, but it has a promising first act and it is certainly far more bearable than an equally dubious play on any other subject.

For students of fictional homicide, as I proudly proclaim myself to be, Mr. Percy's drama has a special technical interest in its presentation of two of the reddest herrings to be found in the recent history of story-book murder. In the first place, the sympathetic murderer has an ominously concealed furnace in the back of his shop, but, despite all temptation, doesn't conceal the victim's body in it. In the second place, he has a poisoned dart, which has been innocently brought him from the mysterious East, but he fails to kill his man with it.

The Poisoned Dart

Going on to another perhaps technical point, I am afraid that the author of "The Shop at Sly Corner" hasn't much confidence in the detective-story knowledge of his audiences. When the oriental dart is presented to Boris Karloff, whom the murderer is none less than, it is announced that it has been dipped in curare, and it is carefully pointed out to the uninformed that curare is a particularly deadly poison. Since anyone who ever read a murder mystery has known that since infancy, I felt Mr. Percy was being condescending in his explanation.

As I have said, the new play is about a sympathetic murderer, which makes it almost unnecessary to add that the victim is a blackmailer. In this case he is a particularly slimy example of his ilk, who knows that Mr. Karloff is both a receiver of stolen goods and a refugee from Devil's Island, and who not only gets money from him to keep his secret but schemes to marry his guileless daughter. So there is nothing for the amiable old fence to do but kill the fellow. It is no secret that he uses that curare on himself in the end.

One of the weaknesses of the evening is the familiar one of comic relief, in this case represented by a maid who is a hypochondriac. Una O'Connor can play such roles in her sleep, which she may conceivably have done last night, but nothing can serve to make the part funny. More amusing is a frightened thief, well acted by Emmett Rogers, as he tells touchingly of the lugubrious side of his profession. But comedy is not the strong point of Mr. Percy's play, and he isn't much more successful in his last-act irony.

Mr. Karloff, that most dignified of monsters, looks almost benign with his white beard and plays the killer credibly, save in an embarrassing scene when he tries to convince a man from Scotland Yard that he is distraught over having been robbed. The delightful Ethel Griffies is far from at her best as a hapless old lady who knows her brother's guilty secrets, but Jay Robinson is admirably obnoxious as the evil blackmailer. The first-act suspense of "The Shop at Sly Corner" is highly promising, but after that the effectiveness is intermittent.

NEW YORK STAR
JANUARY 20, 1949
by John Lardner

Karloff With a French Accent

The curtain had been up for a minute or so when I climbed into my chair at the Booth Tuesday night for the opening of *The Shop at Sly Corner*, and I got the impression that the play was a period piece laid in either the 13th, 15th, 17th, or 19th Century. Anyway, an odd century. As the mists cleared, it turned out that this impression was caused by the way Mr. Boris Karloff was talking, and that the thing Mr. Karloff was talking with was a French accent.

Further research showed that the play takes place at the present time, give or take a lustrum. Mr. Karloff, by spreading out and emphasizing the word "the" (with just a shade of "z" on the front end of it), by saying "a-fraid," "a-lone," and "a-nother," by employing the stately speech tempo of a Shakespearean actor trying to put his children to sleep with selections from "Titus Andronicus," gave the new piece a strange, timeless quality and, as soon became evident, its only real sporting interest for the public.

* * *

Stripped of such trimmings, *The Shop at Sly Corner* is a crime melodrama of remarkable languor and dimness. It's author, Edward Percy, appears to be under the influence of one too many British plays of the quaint-but-quietly-sinister school. His characterization wobbles, his story weaves and bobs. At the finish he applies what is known as a "snap," or O. Henry, ending, the details of which I am constrained by ethics not to describe to you. I will only say that it shows Mr. Percy's Scotland Yard man (played by Reginald Mason) to be the kind of cop who could not, in my opinion, catch a cold in a deep-freeze unit.

In the circumstances, the best part of the evening's entertainment is Mr Karloff with his French-Anglo-Russian-sleepy-time brogue, in the delivery of such lines as "Breeng out the beeg crucible" and "Careful, or you weel keel the goose that lays the golden aig."

Going by the name of Descius Heiss, Mr. Karloff is a saintly-looking antique dealer with white whiskers whose heart is one part gold (he loves his daughter) and several parts pure larceny. He once did a "turn," as they say, on Devil's Island; he is now, behind the front of his quaint London shop, turning a lively dollar as a fencer of stolen goods, or, as he puts it himself, "a re-set-ter and mel-ter."

There is a furnace behind the dummy fireplace in his shop in which he resets and melts. At one point in act 2, I would have given 8-to-5 that he was going to reset and melt his young assistant in this cauldron, for the latter (played with great unction by a youthful actor named Jay Robinson) is a nasty piece of goods who blackmails the old man for every ill-gotten guinea he can lay his hands on. Instead Mr. Karloff first tries to curarize the kid (curarize: "to poison by the use of curare; administer curare to"), and, this failing, winds up by strangling him.

* * *

Thanks to his build, reach, and screen reputation, Mr. Karloff is one of the most convincing throttlers in the game; much more so, I will say in passing, than the fellow who rubbed out the boy downtown in Sartre's *The Victors*, in the first public strangulation of the current season. As soon as this athletic event is out of the way, however, the play settles back into its old fuzzy shape, compounded of people who mean nothing, plot suggestions which lead nowhere, and mild and hollow comedy.

Una O'Connor, as a maidservant, strives gamely in the latter department. Mary MacLeod, as Mr. Karloff's sister, appears to be imitating Mr. Karloff's accent but not quite getting the knack of it. She utters the curtain line of the play: "Oh, Descius!" (pronounced dacious), and that struck me as a good description of the producer's step in bringing *The Shop at Sly Corner* to Broadway.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

JANUARY 19, 1949

By HOWARD BARNES

The Sly Mr. Karloff

A RATHER conventional thriller has had the benefit of admirable acting in "The Shop at Sly Corner." The Edward Percy melodrama at the Booth, which was a great success in London, is a neat and compact essay on the business of receiving stolen goods, blackmail, murder and suicide. If any thing, it is too neat and too amiable. Without the knowing playing of Boris Karloff, Ethel Griffies, Una O'Connor, Jay Robinson and Reginald Mason, it would prove more humdrum.

• • •

Karloff, who turned more or less square in "The Linden Tree," reverts to violence with commendable subtlety in the production. His portrait of a fugitive from Devil's Island, who uses an antique shop in London to build up a prosperous career as a fence, is persuasive and occasionally terrifying. It is altogether the best characterization he has achieved since he renounced horror films. With Miss Griffies playing a sympathetic and frightened sister and Robinson contributing an acid portrayal of an effeminate young blackmailer, the star makes the most of the plot. The ending has a nice twist, as the murderer thinks he has been cornered by an inspector and stabs himself with a poisoned dart only to discover that the policeman wanted to buy a suit of armor, but the thrills are only occasional in "The Shop at Sly Corner."

• • •

What is principally wanting in the show is a reasonable premise for its brief interlude of explosive action. Percy has established the fact that his fence is more devoted to his daughter than his profession, and Mary MacLeod plays the girl with charming naivete. But the conflict between the elderly crook and a poisonous assistant, who discovers his means of livelihood, never rises to the intensity which might have kept the drama taut and terrifying. Even the splendid job which Robinson turns in as the shakedown artist does not inspire more than a murmur of "bravo," when he is strangled.

• • •

Miss Griffies, as always, is supremely assured as the supposed antique dealer's loyal sister. She reflects some of the fright which is not too evident in the script. Miss O'Connor is convincing and funny as a hypochonriacal maid and Mason strides into the climax with great effect as the inspector. Then there are Emmett Rogers, as a petty thief, Philip Saville and Jane Lloyd-Jones to give the work acting substance. Margaret Perry has staged it with all the pace that it could stand and Willis Knighton has designed suitable decor. "The Shop at Sly Corner" is cut to a pattern with very good performers holding that pattern together.

The Sun

JANUARY 19, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE

A Poky London Thriller.

"The Shop at Sly Corner," one of those London melodramas which seems to have had an unaccountable popularity in the British Isles, was brought into the Booth Theater last evening by Gant Gaither. It is a poky and quackish thriller, and its success abroad again puts Broadway and West End in sharp disagreement.

Edward Percy wrote "The Shop at Sly Corner." His principal character is Descius Heiss, an aging antique shop proprietor, who receives stolen goods and melts down gold and jewels. The old gentleman has a family-life side and he'll go in for anything, including murder, to keep his oddly unsuspecting daughter from learning of all the dark doings.

Well, it's not long before the shop assistant, a shifty and cheeky hellion named Archie, makes a discovery or two and begins blackmailing Heiss, collecting handsomely. But when the young monster suggests that the daughter be given to him in marriage he gets strangled for his impertinence. That brings us to the end of act two. The author has a twist for his finish, and after a slow-gaited and tedious third act.

"The Shop at Sly Corner" is a thriller that seldom thrills—an awkward and labored theater-piece that has been staged well enough by Margaret Perry and played well enough by a cast assembled by Gaither, a young Kentuckian determined to become a big-time producer.

Boris Karloff, wearing a beard and smoking jacket, is a fatherly scoundrel; he combines benignity with his fiendishness, warmth and humor with his sinister qualities, and he plays the old shopkeeper with considerable skill. Una O'Connor putters about amusingly as a cackling housekeeper and Ethel Griffies asserts herself as the proprietor's sister, caught up in crime. Emmett Rogers brings gusto to his playing of a thief and Jay Robinson has some fascinating moments as the sly and slimy blackmailer. Mary MacLeod is attractive in the role of the adored daughter and Philip Saville is manly as her fiance, a ship's doctor in the merchant service. Willis Knighton's setting is a good one.

"The Shop at Sly Corner" is a humdrum melodrama. Another importation that is all in error.

Daily Mirror

JANUARY 19, 1949

'The Shop at Sly Corner' Is Poor Melodrama

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Edward Percy's "The Shop at Sly Corner" has been making the rounds of the producers' offices for several years. In fact, at one time it had a tryout, but never reached New York. Now, for some reason, Gant Gaither has seen fit to bring it to the Booth Theatre last evening. The reason escapes us.

"The Shop at Sly Corner," in our opinion, is a pedestrian melodrama. It has to do with a refugee from Devil's Island who has established himself as a fence for stolen property in London. There he rears a daughter who shows definite promise as a concert violinist. He uses an antique shop as a respectable front for his underworld ventures.

All goes well until an effeminate clerk in the shop discovers the source of his real wealth and blackmails him mercilessly. And then strangely the not-very-manly blackmailer takes a fancy to the daughter, and demands that the father force her to break her engagement to a young doctor and marry him.

Enraged, the fence throttles the blackmailer. There is a trick ending, somewhat after the manner of O. Henry, but it isn't considered cricket for a reviewer to reveal the final twist to a chiller, even a very tepid chiller like this one.

Gant Gaither may make mistakes on occasion in selecting scripts to produce, but he always gives them first-rate productions. In this instance, he has engaged the best available cast. The names read like a page from Who's Who in the Theatre.

Boris Karloff, Ethel Griffies, Una O'Connor and Reginald Mason head the company. All excellent. It is good to have Mason back with us again. He is his usual suave self, as deft and polished as when he was gracing English drawing-room hits.

Others meriting salutes are Jay Robinson, Mary MacLeod, Jane Lloyd-Jones, Philip Saville and Emmett Rogers.

Margaret Perry has staged the play capably, and Willis Knighton has done an impressive and atmospheric setting.

"The Shop at Sly Corner" offers a brief and not very exciting evening in the theatre. The first act is almost as short as a prologue. You hardly finish installing your hat under the seat before it's time to dash to the lobby for an intermission smoke. We cannot recommend the new arrival as a good entertainment buy.

Broadway has been needing a click thriller for some time, but "The Shop at Sly Corner" doesn't fill the bill. An admirable cast is just not able to put sufficient vitamins into an anemic script.